Bilingual Education and Ethnic Identity of Korean Chinese

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**Introduction**

As a minority group in China, Korean Chinese were once regarded as a language maintenance model by the success of their implementation of bilingual education (Korean and Chinese) in the past decades. However, due to the China’s economic reform and open door policy, the great importance of understanding Chinese and the considerable job opportunities outside the Korean autonomous regions led a great number of Korean Chinese pour into big cities in China and overseas. At the same time, Korean Chinese students are inclined to give up bilingual schools and turn to Chinese schools in order to learning Chinese faster and better. As one of the important factors of ethnic identity, the decreasing use of the Korean language and the phenomenon of losing this language among young people in big cities would become the cause of the crisis of weakening the ethnic identity of Korean Chinese people. Therefore, it is urgent to come up with new policies and solutions for the reform of bilingual education of Korean Chinese in order to both make students become competitive among Han society and remain their ethnic identity.

**Background of the Korean Chinese in Northeast China**

Korean Chinese refer to a group of border-crossing people who immigrated into northeast China from Korean Peninsula beginning late in the 19th century. Reasons like a series of natural disasters and Qing dynasty’s loosening of border controls and acceptance of external migration pushed many Koreans to migrate. After Japan’s occupation of Korea and the political division of North and South Korea in the early and mid-20th century, larger numbers of Koreans kept moving to China. By 1936, there were more than 800,000 Koreans in China. In 1949, Korean Chinese were officially recognized as a group of ethnic minority by the Chinese Authority since the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded.

According to the 2010 PRC census, 91.60% of Chinese citizens belonged to the Han minority and 8.40% to the other 55 ethnic groups. The population of Korean minority was 1.83 million and represented 0.14 % of total population. They were China’s eleventh largest non-Han nationality, and most of them lived in Northeast China, especially in Yanbian, which is a Korean Chinese autonomous district. The Korean Chinese have maintained their ethnic culture by using and primarily being educated in the Korean language, marrying within their ethnic group, maintaining Korean customs, life style, and value system (Attane & Courbage, 2000).

**The Identity of the Korean Chinese**

Kwon (1996) claimed that the Korean minority of China has developed a dual identity as both Chinese nationals and ethnic Koreans. Their contribution in the founding of PRC, and China’s policy of minority groups played an important role in building their political identity as Chinese citizens. On the other hand, the Korean minority has showed the positive attitude to maintain their own culture and traditions (Lee, 1994). The minority policy of China also allowed them to use their language and to conduct their ethnic educational system. Later, the majority of China’s academia has reached the agreement that the identity of Korean Chinese people could be divided in three folds: the national identity as citizens of China, ethnic identity as a minority ethnic group of China, and cross-border ethnic identity as an ethnic group which share common history and culture with other Koreans on Korean peninsula and elsewhere in the world (Li, 2007).

Before 1980s, Korean Chinese lived in a rather closed area due to the living behaviors and language barriers. This isolation from other ethnic groups (mainly Han Chinese) didn’t seem to cause severe problems and created a perfect environment for the language preservation instead. However, starting from the period of the open door policy, Korean Chinese considered that they have been marginalized from the mainstream since being blocked in their small community, they were less competitive, and had less opportunity in business and development. Therefore, the Korean minority didn’t regard themselves as the mainstream in China although they considered themselves Chinese citizens. Choi (2001) claimed that they think themselves not as the “host” of the country but as “guests.”

**Bilingual Education in China**

Except Hui and Manchu, each of China’s minority nationalities has its own language (Johnson and Chhetri, 2000). Now, there are thirty minorities have their languages in written forms since the government began to create new scripts for minorities in 1958 (Gao, 2010). Starting from 1979, the Chinese government began to implement bilingual education for minorities and spare much effort to legislation for it (Zhou, 2001). Ethnic autonomous regions started being authorized to develop their own educational programs, which includes levels and kinds of schools, curriculum content, and languages of instruction (Postiglinoe, 2009). Therefore, those minority communities adopted education laws that encouraged bilingual education according to the condition of the students. The aim of bilingual education was for the preservation of minority language and culture and increasing minority school attendance. Bilingual education programs include using the ethnic language for instruction, learning the specific culture and customs of the minority, and it started from kindergarten to higher education (Zhao, 2010). In 1995, a national education law was adopted by the Chinese People’s Congress which claimed that Mandarin Chinese should be used as the basic L1 in school throughout the country and the specific minority language as L1 for schools in minority communities (Sun & Gao, 1996). Zhou (2001) summarized the bilingual education in primary and secondary schools in four forms: Chinese as L1 with the minority language as L2; the minority language as L1 with Chinese as L2; both the minority language and Chinese as L1; and Chinese as L1 with the minority language as a supplement but only during preschool and the first two years in primary school. Some universities of in type 1 minority areas offer courses with instruction of the minority language.

**Bilingual Education of Korean Chinese**

The bilingual education of the Korean Chinese was identified as a language maintenance model, which is used to evaluate the learning of a non-dominant language in itself and it also encourages speakers of the language continue to use it (Gao, 2010). The success of the bilingual education of Korean and Chinese during the past fifty years was basically due to the use of Korean language as the instruction language in Korean bilingual school (Ma, 2004). In the communities where Koreans are concentrated, Korean bilingual schools have been established from primary to high education levels. Korean is used as the medium of instruction and Mandarin Chinese is taught as a subject (Gao, 2010).

Lee (1987) pointed out that Koreans in China had a much higher percentage of literacy and middle school and college graduation than the national average or any other minorities in China. They achieved the highest level of education attainment among all the minority nationalities and maintained a strong sense of ethnic identity. It was also introduced in Lee’s paper that the majority of Korean children were required to attend Korean primary and middle schools, and there was a restriction numbers for students who can attend Han Chinese schools. Especially in the Korean autonomous region Yanbian in northeast China, the total number of all students there reached about 22 percent of Yanbian’s total population. There were in total 241 regular middle schools with 191,330 students, and about 47 percent of the students were Korean. Yanbian University, which included 70 percent Koreans in 1980s, could be regarded as another symbol of Korean educational advancement, with its largely increasing amount of students, teachers, and also programs and courses. Lee (1987) concluded the foundations of the flourish and success of bilingual education of the Korean minority in Yanbian are the facts that they have inherited a strong cultural tradition and value system which emphasized education, and they had Yanbian as a relatively closed territory for the protection of ethnic identity and educational enrichment. Also, the Koreans kept guarding their ethnic identity by protecting their language, social customs and culture.

However, such prosperity of the education of Korean didn’t sustain since China’s economic reforms and open door policy in 1980s. The Koreans once engaged in agricultural production for their living started to go out of their autonomous regions in order to search more job opportunities or engaged in business. Some moved to urban and coastal areas in China, others went abroad to Korea, Russia, and some other countries in order to make more money. Since entering the 21st century, the population of the Koreans who stayed in rural areas where they used to live decreased to only 30 percent, and the majority of them were seniors, children, and people with disabilities (Li, 2007).

The flowing population and urbanization of the Korean minority people brought negative side effects to the community and especially to the bilingual education. Due to the lacking numbers of students, the amount of primary and middle school in Yanbian sharply decreased since 1990s. Gao (2010) summarized the increasing disadvantages of Korean language teaching such as the decreasing amount of Korean student who attend these schools; an increasing number of Korean students coming from dysfunctional families; funding shortages; and a shortage of qualified Korean teachers. Gao also mentioned that in the entrance examination for senior-secondary education in 2004, Korean students generally achieved lower scores than did Han students in almost every subject, and there were fewer Korean students could get access to higher education. Therefore, many Korean parents started to send their children to Chinese schools to guarantee the quality of education. Moreover, most Korean autonomous regions are composed of a small number of Korean Chinese students nowadays (Gao, 2010). Korean students spoke Chinese quite often which actually prevent them from improving the Korean language. The Korean Chinese parents also encouraged their children to speak Chinese since many higher institutions apply Chinese as the medium of instruction. The design of the curriculums in Korean schools also worth being discussed due to its disadvantages. According to Choi (2004), the curriculum in Korean schools is based almost exclusively on translated version of standard textbooks. It means that instead of Korean history and culture, what the Korean students learned in the classroom are Chinese history, geography, and literature in the Korean language (Ma, 2004). The quantity and quality of ethnically relevant extracurricular activities have also deceased due to the financial shortage and less concern.

**The Current Situation of Bilingual Education and Identity**

Such drastic changes of the situation of bilingual education in recent years, which include decreasing numbers of students attend bilingual schools and much more effort is spent on learning and using the Chinese language, would definitely cause the crisis of Korean Chinese students’ identity since one of the most important symbols of an ethnic group’s identity is ethnic language (Bourhis 1983; Collier & Thomas 1988; Giles &J 1981; Kouzmin 1988). Giles et al. (1977) claimed that the minority language could serve as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural solidarity. He also stated that “it is used for reminding the group about its cultural heritage, for transmitting group feelings, and for excluding members of the out group from its internal transactions” (p.307).

According to the study of Ma (2004), many Korean Chinese people, especially older people, take pride in their ethnic language and have strong intention to preserve their language which could be regarded as one of the most important elements in maintaining their ethnic heritage. However, as they are starting to be aware of the importance of acquiring the Chinese language in order to face the fierce competition in both schooling and job seeking, bilingual education in Korean schools are less considered by Korean minority parents and most of them hope their children could be master of the Chinese language at the first place. It is also showed by the decreasing number of the population of Korean Chinese with high proficiency of understanding and using the Korean language. Li (2007) stated that among nearly 2 million Korean minorities in China, about 70 percent of them could be able to use the Korean language fluently, and the number would be 50 percent in areas outside the Korean autonomous regions. In China’s major cities such as Beijing, Harbin, and Shenyang, over 60 percent of Korean youth have given up using Korean (Zheng, 1996: 281). In order to achieve a better future in China, some Koreans are willing to consciously and more deeply integrate into mainstream society and culture (Olivier, 1993).

Except the language, the loss of ethnic culture, which is another important factor of ethnic identity, also would caused by the curriculum design in bilingual education. Although China’s policy towards minority education encourages the preservation of the minority language and culture, it only functions at the linguistic level (Gao, 2010). As is mentioned earlier, the textbooks used by Korean schools are translated from Chinese ones, and the content is about Chinese culture instead of their ancestral land, Korean’s, which definitely would prevent students from enhancing their ethnic identity. It is true that by learning Chinese culture, Korean Chinese students would be instilled strong national identity as a citizen of China; however, it definitely brings negative influence to their ethnic identity due to the lack of the knowledge of Korean history and culture. Also, decreasing the Korean culture-related extracurricular activities would cut down the opportunities of preserving ethnic identity.

Today, the majority of Korean Chinese people still remain the strong ethnic identity (Ma, 2004; Li, 2007; Gao, 2010), and they tend to distinguish themselves from Han Chinese by some ethnic characteristics. The Korean minority are inclined to consider themselves different from Han Chinese in aspects of their behavior patterns, way of thinking, life-style which includes clothing and food (Choi, 2001). The reason behind is that their perception and understanding of Han Chinese are quite superficial and they didn’t develop a deep contact with Han Chinese although they might live in a Han society. However, the assimilative power of Han-oriented society and culture will continuously work as long as the Korean minorities live their life surrounded by Han Chinese and their culture. Their ethnic identity today is largely based on blood heritage especially after the less use of the Korean language.

**Conclusion**

As a successful model of bilingual education in China in the past decades, the education of Korean minorities today is facing the unprecedented crisis due to the large amount of people have moved out of Korean autonomous regions and poured into cities of Han society and more and more students are sent to non-Korean schools where they cannot learn and seldom use Korean in their lives. Although Korean Chinese still have strong ethnic identity as shown in several researches, the loss of the Korean language and the less understanding of the history and culture of Korean would cause the hidden crisis of weakening or even losing their ethnic identity. Korean intellectuals and relative scholars have been attached great attention to this issue and provide related suggestions. Ma (2004) mentioned a new bilingual system in Korean elementary schools in Yanji was conducted from the year 2002. In this reform, only two subjects use the Korean language as the medium of instruction, which are Korean language and mathematics. All other subjects are taught in Chinese. Therefore, the students’ Chinese proficiency level is supposed to be equal to that of students in Chinese schools. This new policy aims to attract more students to receive bilingual education. Gao (2010) claimed that the survival of a multilingual country refers to language pluralism among both the ethnic minorities and the majority of the nation. He suggested that minority people could learn the majority language and culture, and the majority people could learn the minority language and culture. Therefore bilingual education could be better implemented in more schools in China. The situation of bilingual education of Korean minorities and other minority groups in China is necessary and urgent to be reformed and improved, since it links the future of Korean Chinese students in China and also the preservation of their language, culture, and ethnic identity.

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